

Caiaphas the High Priest

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Caiaphas the High Priest - Jesus Considered a Threat

According to the Gospel of John, the news that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead spread like wild fire. Caiaphas the high priest and the Jewish council of the Sanhedrin were enraged. This kind of miracle would surely seduce the people to follow Jesus into rebellion. The fear was that such a rebellion would provoke a clampdown by the Romans.

Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.

“What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.”

Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.” (John 11:47-50)

“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Protecting power and public order was now the real priority and Caiaphas the high priest knew that Jesus must die.



Caiaphas the High Priest - An Important Historical Figure

Caiaphas was the Jewish high priest who served in Jerusalem from about 18 to 36 AD. History tells us that he was the son-in-law of Annas, and likely from the tribe of Levi. As a member of the Jewish priestly class, Caiaphas was part of the sect of the Sadducees, who served in priestly as well as political and judicial roles. The other main religious group was the Pharisees – who focused more on religious laws and teaching in the local synagogues. The Sadducees tended to be corrupted by money and more interested in the political power and benefits that came from close ties with the Romans.

Caiaphas the high priest is an important historical anchor for three of the Gospels – Matthew, Luke and John. He is also attested in the writings of Roman historian Flavius Josephus, where Josephus attests to his name, position, and time of service as high priest. Interestingly, Josephus specifies that he was “Joseph son of Caiaphas,” but that he was also known as “Joseph who was called Caiaphas.” This explains why the Gospels merely use the name “Caiaphas.”

The name “Joseph son of Caiaphas” is also found on an ossuary – or, bone box — found just outside the walls of first-century Jerusalem. In 1990, a tomb was accidentally discovered during a construction project, and subsequently excavated. Twelve ossuaries were found inside the rock-cut tomb, two of which contained the family name “Caiaphas.” The ossuary inscribed with “Joseph son of Caiaphas” was particularly ornate. Inside, remains of six individuals were discovered, including a man about 60-years-old.

The tomb where the ossuary was found also contained a coin of Herod Agrippa I dated 42/43 AD, which places this ossuary in the right place at the right time. Based on the evidence, most scholars now accept that this artifact is the very ossuary that held the bones of Joseph Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest and the man who became such an important part of the Gospel story.

According to the Gospel of John, “Caiaphas was the one who advised the Jewish leaders that it would be good if one man died for the people” (John 18:14). The chief priests gave orders that anyone knowing the whereabouts of Jesus should notify them immediately so he could be arrested. Passover was approaching, and the Temple officials figured that Jesus wouldn’t pass on the opportunity to show up in Jerusalem.

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Randall acts as the lead writer for ColdWater’s Drive Thru History® TV series and Drive Thru History® “Adventures” curriculum.

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